

# Books of The Times

## Situation Normal: All Fouled Up

By THOMAS LASK

*P. S. WILKINSON. By C. D. B. Bryan. 441 pages. Harper. \$5.95.*

**W**INNER of the \$10,000 Harper Prize for 1965, "P. S. Wilkinson" is the story of a Yale man, Philip Sadler Wilkinson, who enters the Army, lands in Korea, is released, fights a number of civilian battles and is called back into service during the Berlin crisis.

It was written by C. D. B. Bryan (Courtlandt Dixon Barnes Bryan, the stepson of John O'Hara), a Yale man who entered the Army, served in Korea, was released and then called back during the Berlin crisis. The resemblance ends there, and I hope Mr. Bryan had a better time of it than his hero, for that young man has a tough time of it in service and is not much happier in mufti. Wilkinson, a tall, loutish fellow, attractive in a disorganized, unfocused way, cannot adjust to civilian life, indeed, he can barely make contact with it. There is a streak of the social worker in Wilkinson. He finds a prostitute with a heart of gold; in Washington he becomes involved with an old love whose marriage is breaking up; in New York he is the good companion of a lonely girl he barely likes.

In Korea his trouble was simply a case of unwillingness to follow orders. These said that any "unauthorized indigenous personnel" (translation: any native woman) caught in the compound after hours was to have her head shaved as an example to others. Wilkinson could never get himself to follow that directive.

As a civilian he is amazed that the world rolled on merrily while he was doing his bit for God and country. People were being married and divorced, raising families, building careers. And once out, he gets caught up in such a whirlpool of activity involving social rounds, economic obligations and family loyalties, that he feels that neither his fate nor his life is his own. Called back into service, he finally has the chance to calm down long enough to make the right decision.

In summary, "P. S. Wilkinson" sounds more full of incident than it is. Mr. Bryan has little sense of pacing and the art of selection is to him unknown. He feeds reams of nondescript detail into his pages. P. S. never merely dresses. His wardrobe is described in full and every button buttoned. No taxi is taken without assurance to the reader that the cabbie did, truly, get paid. No telephone conversation is concluded with-

out the usual amenities. Mr. Bryan has not yet learned to record long boring talks without boring the reader too. And the amount of coffee and spiritous liquor consumed in these pages is enough to make the reader queasy inside.

The characters, with the exception of P. S.'s father, a self-righteous, stuffed shirt living by a feudal code of his own, are drawn without much individuality. The Army men sound like the officers in "Mister Roberts" or "Don't Go Near the Water." The young men could be any interchangeable button-down types; the dowagers are indistinguishable from the first hundred ladies assembled on Long Island's North Shore. Though you will not confuse them, you will not much remember them either.

And there are little tricks of the trade he has only half assimilated: a stream of consciousness technique that consists of putting expletives like "Oh my God, here she comes, what do I do now?" into italics, and distributing gobs of portentous utterances like ballast in the hold of a ship. Two chapters do stand out. One involves a lie detector test of the Central Intelligence Agency, which has a grimly comic air, and another dealing with a cheating incident in prep school, skillfully captures young terrors and childhood anxieties.

In short, Mr. Bryan's is the typical first novel. Had it been half, nay a third, as long, the good things would have obscured the faults. As it stands now, it must have been a hard decision for the judges who awarded it the prize.



Wallace Litwin

C. D. B. Bryan